

Summary: Bulgaria and the Bobokov Brothers

Prefatory Note

This material is distributed by the Alexandria Group International on behalf of Atanas, Plamen, and Hristina Bobokov. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Key Points

In May, 2020, agents of Ivan Geshev, Bulgaria's Prosecutor-General, arrested Atanas and Plamen Bobokov, brothers and prominent businessmen who manufacture batteries and lubricants for motor vehicles. The Bobokovs are hardworking middle-aged entrepreneurs who had unblemished legal records and who have succeeded not as oligarchs, but rather as providers of high-quality products for consumers. They were charged with "illegally importing garbage into Bulgaria from Italy." They were also charged with "influence-peddling," a nebulous offense that involves currying favor with government officials.

The brothers were arrested in the dead of night under flawed detention orders that fail to meet European Union (EU) and other western standards. Plamen, who voluntarily surrendered his cellphone and passport, was released after paying the largest bail in Bulgarian history. In early August, the court announced bail arrangements for Atanas, but he remains in custody in prison in dire circumstances. For twelve weeks, he has been denied proper medical attention for possibly life-threatening conditions that his warders will not allow doctors to diagnose, let alone treat. He is subject to an additional bail hearing scheduled to be held on August 18. Numerous international human rights organizations have criticized Bulgaria's detention system for the "inhumane" and "degrading" conditions in which detainees are held. They also fault Bulgaria for denying prisoners appropriate medical care and for providing inadequate care for those fortunate enough to receive medical attention. As a leading professor of politics has written, "After a break of three decades, Bulgaria again has *de facto* political prisoners."

Since their arrests, the Bobokovs have been tried in the media. Regime-controlled media immediately broadcast video footage of the brothers in handcuffs and forced into "perp walks." Accounts of their alleged offenses have been illustrated with footage of garbage men loading trucks with residential trash from Bulgarian cities, even though the Bobokovs import only waste batteries for recycling, and only with proper permits; they do not traffic in garbage. Photographs of the two families on vacation are twisted to depict them as vacuous and callous hedonists. Media have leaked conversations between Plamen and President Ruman Radev, who is the last remaining impediment to the regime's ruination of Bulgarian democracy. Rather than demonstrating improper conduct, the communications show a normal, healthy interplay between government and private commerce. Perhaps more egregiously, Prosecutor-General Geshev conducted an illegal raid on Radev's offices. A self-declared "instrument of God," Geshev will clearly stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

The Bobokovs' case fits the increasingly common pattern of "criminal capture" in Bulgaria today. The regime targets legitimate businesses and, through combinations of racketeering, shakedowns, physical harm and intimidation, malicious prosecution, manipulation

of state-controlled media, and other abuses of the rule of law, seize ownership of the successful enterprises. As one of the most prominent victims of the regime has observed, the Prosecutor-General's judiciary is not a "Specialized Criminal Court," but a "Specialized Criminal Group." Created ostensibly to combat corruption, this recent addition to Bulgaria's judicial system provides the regime with the means to stifle political opposition, capture businesses, and torment their owners into submission by all means necessary.

At the center of this corruption are Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and his ruling GERB party. In concert with his Prosecutor-General Geshev and the networks of media and oligarchs of his own creation, Borissov presides over an increasingly autocratic government that is systematically reversing decades of progress in Bulgaria's transition from communism to democracy. In addition to Borissov, the two most menacing and sinister figures in Bulgaria's deterioration into criminality are Geshev and oligarch-in-chief Deylan "Potbelly" Peevski, who controls eighty percent of the country's broadcast media and a significant part of its press.

After the communist era, Bulgaria emerged as a vibrant nascent democracy, but its political and judicial systems have now been hijacked by a powerful group of criminal actors. Its economy is being plundered. As the European Court of Human Rights and international rights organizations have found, the country's Prosecutor-General is "above the law." Freedom House ranks Bulgaria as a "semi-consolidated democracy." Transparency International lists it as the most corrupt EU country. According to Reporters Without Borders, Bulgaria not only has the "lowest standards of press freedom in Europe," but has ranked 111th in the world for the past three years.

With no end in sight to the Borissov regime's abuses, Bulgarian citizens have taken to the streets of Sofia and other major cities to protest. They are calling for Borissov, Geshev, and the head of the state-owned television network to resign. Their peaceful demonstrations are now in their second month. Some participants and journalists covering the events have been beaten. State-friendly media at first ignored the protests and continue to downplay their size and political significance, but the protesters refuse to be deterred. In response to the demonstrations, Borissov fired some of his cabinet members and, on August 14, offered to resign if parliament elects a "grand national assembly" to make amendments to the constitution. Protesters immediately denounced his "inadequate" plan, which would require the support of two-thirds of the Parliament and would still take weeks to effect. (One of the amendments would change Prosecutor-General Geshev's term in office from seven to five years.) Otherwise, Borissov has vowed to remain in power at least until his official mandate ends in April, 2021.

Can Bulgaria's civil society survive the Borissov regime's continued assault on rights and liberties for eight more months? In a recent statement, the U.S. Embassy in Sofia writes, "Every nation deserves a judicial system that is non-partisan and accountable to the rule of law. We support the Bulgarian people as you peacefully advocate for increased faith in your democratic system and promote the rule of law in Bulgaria, No one is above the law."

Please join the Bobokovs, suppressed journalists, other victims of the Bulgarian regime's corruption, the nation's peaceable protesters, and western democratic nations as they seek a return to justice and liberty in this troubled nation.

As of August 16, 2020